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Japanese Paper Says Spies Got Pilot to Defect

TOKYO (UPI) — American and British spies in Moscow spent two years convincing a discontented young Soviet pilot to defect with his top-secret MiG-25 "Foxbat" interceptor five years ago, Japan's Kyodo news service said.

Kyodo, quoting Japanese intelligence sources, reported yesterday that CIA agents promised Lt. Viktor Belenko, then 29, "a protected, free life in the United States," if he defected with the plane.

Belenko flew his top-secret "Foxbat" — the most advanced interceptor in the Soviet arsenal — into Hakodate airport on Japan's northernmost main island of Hokkaido on Sept. 6, 1976. He was flown to asylum in the United States only three days later.

The restless Soviet pilot at the time reportedly carried a message — written in English — "I want to seek asylum. Please contact the U.S. intelligence organization."

Kyodo reported Belenko's crucial defection was started in motion when an agent of MI-6, the British counterpart of CIA, approached him in a Moscow bar in October, 1974.

The pilot continued to meet secretly in parks once every two or three months with Western spies, including CIA personnel, until his transfer to the Far East base in Sikharyovka from which he defected.

"I recall the speedy arrival of experts into Japan only 18 hours after the MiG-25's touchdown," one defense agency official said of the strategic coup.

The Kremlin accused Japan of "an unfriendly act" by allowing American aeronautic specialists to dissect the MiG-25, which the U.S. defense secretary had once called "probably the best interceptor in production in the world."

However, U.S. officials later reported the plane, which was causing concern in Europe because of a reported ability to fly exceptionally high and at three times the speed of sound, did not match American models in many respects.

The Japanese news agency said Belenko's defection had been influenced by matrimonial troubles and disillusionment over slow promotion in the Soviet air force due to a power struggle in the Russian hierarchy.

The Soviet pilot left for the United States amid tight security only three days after landing in Japan. The Senate judiciary committee last September, citing his invaluable intelligence contributions, passed a bill making Belenko an American citizen.